ED 155 936 A WORKSHOP APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPOSITION. TEAL OCCASIONAL PAPERS, VOL. 1, 1977.

1 OF 1 HAWES, LORNA; RICHARDS, BARBARA BRITISH COLUMBIA ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, VANCOUVER. 77 16P.

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 936 FL 009 555

AUTHOR	Hawes, Lorna; Richards, Barbara
TITLE	A Workshop Approach to Teaching Composition. TEAL Occasional Papers, Vol. 1, 1977.
INSTITUTION	British Columbia Association of Teachers of English as an Additional Language, Vancouver.
PUB DATE	77
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Maureen C. Sawkins, British Columbia Association of TEAL, c/o King Edward Campus, V.C.C., 2750 Oak St., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada ($2.50 Canadian plus $.50 postage)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	College Language Programs; *Composition (Literary); *English (Second Language); Foreign Students; Individual Instruction; *Individualized Instruction; Junior Colleges; *Language Instruction; Paragraphs; Programed Instruction; *Teaching Methods; Tutoring; Writing Exercises; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Workshop Approach

ABSTRACT

The Garrison approach to teaching composition has been successfully adapted to second language writing instruction. This approach is based on three principles: individualization, instant feedback, and inductive learning. First, the individualized tutorial approach is used because each student has different needs. Secondly, the method demands that each student's effort receive instant, in-class feedback. Thirdly, the student learns by writing, not by analyzing and copying someone else's writing. This method is designed for a one-semester course having three, four, or five hours of instruction per week. The student writes in class and his work is checked in class for five operational skills: content, tone, organization, sentence construction, and diction. Since the checking time with each student is necessarily limited, the Garrison method relies on three "boxes" to which the instructor can direct the student for help. These boxes, which are labeled "remedial," "information," and "assignments," contain files of worksheets on both grammatical and stylistic points. Foreign students may have problems initially in adapting to such an informal, student-centered method, but this method has been used successfully for three semesters in English as a second language classes at Vancouver Community College. (Author/CFM)

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A WORKSHOP APPROACH TO TEACHING COMPOSITION

LORNA HAWES AND BARBARA RICHARDS

Whether at high school or at college level, the students in a typical composition class have widely varying interests and aims. John may be going into engineering; Sara wants to be a nurse; Philip is interested in accounting and commerce; Susie favours arts and the humanities. The class is not homogeneous; each student is going into a different area, and thus each has different writing needs. In addition, each student has different writing strengths and weaknesses. John has excellent ideas, but cannot organize his data; Sara's organization is clear and logical, but her spelling ....! With only five hours per week at his disposal, the writing instructor must help each student effectively express himself in the written dialect of English according to his individual needs, building on his strengths and conquering his weaknesses. An impossible task? Not if the Garrison method is followed!

Although originally developed for native speakers at freshman university level, Roger Garrison's approach to teaching composition (Garrison, 1974) is being successfully adapted to second language writing instruction. This paper firstly describes the Garrison method. Secondly, in light of the special problems faced by the second language learner, it suggests some ways in which the method can be adapted.

The Garrison approach is based on three principles: individualization, instant feedback, and inductive learning. The individualized tutorial approach is used because each student has different needs. According to his interests and needs, the student creates his own assignments, works at his own speed on his own problems, and receives individual guidance from the instructor -- on a one-to-one basis. Secondly, the method demands that a student's effort receive instant, in-class, feedback. Garrison maintains that home marking is unsatisfactory on two counts: it strongly emphasizes weaknesses rather than strengths (note how many marking symbols are negative rather than positive); it produces a time lapse during which the student's interest in his work is severely dissipated. Instant verbal in-class feedback allows the instructor to comment on a paper's strengths and weaknesses at the peak of the student's interest. Recognizing and building on strengths is as essential as is reducing weaknesses. Thirdly, the method is inductive. Garrison believes writers learn by writing - not by analyzing and copying someone else's writing. Thus, instead of forcing his communication into another writer's pattern, the student is encouraged to create his own style by extensive and varied writing practice. With guidance from the instructor, the student learns to analyze his own errors, thus becoming a self-editor.

The Garrison method is designed for a one-semester course having three, four, or five hours instruction per week. During the first week, the student writes two or three one-page passages, which the instructor keeps for diagnostic purposes. The student also completes an extensive questionnaire, from which the instructor may later suggest assignments if the student cannot readily create his own. The next few class sessions are spent explaining the tutorial system and discussing the five operational skills for which the student's work will be checked. In order of importance and checking, these skills cover content, tone, organization, sentence construction, and diction. Content concentrates on the list of specifics of the communication, such as concrete details and facts. Tone concentrates on the choice of the appropriate register of the communication (suggestion, command, formal, informal, etc.) and includes grammatical point of view (first person, third person). Organization concentrates on the clear and sequenced presentation of the communication, including lead, developmental and final sentences. Sentence construction concentrates on both the variety and the grammaticality of individual sentences. Diction concentrates on the choice of appropriate vocabulary items.

The remainder of the semester is devoted to workshop sessions, during which the student either works on his own assignment or receives individual assistance from the instructor. The instructor keeps a series of numbered cards on his desk. When the student is ready to have his work checked, he takes a card, and waits until the instructor calls his number. He and the instructor then check the assignment at the front desk. The instructor checks for ONE skill at a time. As Garrison states: "One problem at a time, and the most important problem first, is the proper correcting motto." (Garrison, 1974, p-82) First, content is checked. If the instructor feels the paragraph does not have adequate content, he points out to the student where improvements could be made and sends him back to revise his work. The instructor does not consider tone until he is satisfied with the content. And it is only when content and tone are satisfactory that the instructor checks for the next point - organization. In this way, both student and instructor concentrate on one aspect of writing at a time. To simultaneously check for all five operational skills only confuses the student. Working on one aspect at a time may result in the student having to redraft his paragraph several times. However, Garrison does not see redrafting as a waste of time; rather, he believes "the major training device in learning how to write is rewriting." (Garrison, 1974, p-58) When the fifth operational skill (diction) has been revised, then, and only then, is the piece of writing considered acceptable. The student may not start a fresh assignment until the previous one is accepted. The method of constant checking and rewriting enables the student to finally produce a good piece of writing -- a goal which provides strong motivation. The old method of having a student write an essay to be marked out of class and handed back with errors noted often does not allow the student to realize that he is actually capable of producing a good piece of work. Having his essay returned covered in red marks merely reinforces his suspicion that he is not a good writer. The Garrison method shows the student that, given time and effort, he can produce good writing.

The instructor in the Garrison method must be "a good listener, a fast reader, a good diagnostician: in short, an editor-on-the-spot." (Garrison, 1974, p-58) Because the average class consists of 20-25 students (Garrison maintains the method can be used with 30 or more students), the instructor must be adept at quickly diagnosing the student's problems and at directing him to where he can receive help. As the checking time with each student is necessarily limited (1 minute to 7-8 minutes), the Garrison workshop relies on three "boxes" to which the instructor can direct the student for this help.

The Remedial, Information, and Assignment Boxes contain files of worksheets on both grammatical and stylistic points. If the student has a problem with pronoun reference, he is directed to the appropriate file in the Remedial Box, where he finds a set of instructions to be applied to his own paragraph. By applying the instructions to his own writing, the student will rectify any errors in pronoun reference. Rather than being isolated exercises, which do not carry over into the student's work, the Remedial Worksheets pertain directly to the student's own writing, thus providing high motivation through their immediate relevance. Remedial Worksheets may cover such problems as Wordiness, Unity, Awkwardness and Subject-Verb Agreement. For example, if the student has a problem with Wordiness, he may be asked to rewrite his paragraph in simple sentences, and then to join his basic ideas together in a suggested variety of ways. In this way, extraneous words and phrases may be eliminated. When doing Remedial Worksheets, the student may also need to use the Information Box, which, as the name suggests, supplies details on various grammatical and stylistic points; these may range from information on tricky subject-verb sgreements, to suggestions for writing good lead sentences, to examples of effective rhetorical devices.

The files in the third box -- the Assignment Box -- contain suggestions on the best way to write a particular type of prose, such as a proposal, a narration, a memo, publicity, or a book report. The Assignment Sheets do not provide topics for writing; rather they point out the aim of a certain type of writing, and suggest solutions for producing it. The Remedial, Information, and Assignment Boxes, at all times present in the workshop, are constantly available to the student.

The choice of assignments rests for the most part with the individual student. Because each student has different writing needs, he chooses the type of writing assignment which will be of most use to him. He checks the Assignment Box to find a type of writing he would like to try. The student also provides his own topics for writing. Garrison maintains that the sole purpose of writing is to communicate information and ideas, and that the student himself brings to the class the information and ideas which he needs to communicate. Rather than provide the student with a topic which may well be irrelevant to his individual writing needs, Garrison draws upon the plentiful resources of the student himself. Motivation thus remains high, for the student writes about what is of most interest to him. Should the student be at a loss for a topic, the instructor has recourse to the detailed questionnaire completed at the beginning of the semester and can thus suggest a topic closely related to the student's interests.

For the most part, assignments are limited to one page in length (three page maximum if the student wishes to attempt a longer piece). If the student can organize and write a one page assignment effectively, he obviously has the capability to do the same for a longer piece; if he cannot organize and write a one page assignment, there is little point in his attempting a longer passage. In addition, short assignments reduce the individual checking time, thus allowing more students to be processed per class session.

An instructor using the Garrison method evaluates the student's writing ability by the quantity and quality of acceptable pieces produced during the semester. Garrison suggests that a minimum of seven acceptable pieces qualify for a D or D+, with twelve acceptable pieces rating a B+ or higher. Quality may be judged by asking the student to choose what he considers to be his two best pieces of work to date, giving him the option of rewriting them for improvement. Garrison stresses that quality can only be evaluated in terms of what the student produces at the end of the term and should not be judged according to the whole term's work. A student who can write well by the end of the semester should not be penalized for his earlier, less successful efforts.

The advantages of the Garrison method of writing instruction are many. Because of the individualized tutorial approach, the student works only in those areas where he needs guidance, and is, therefore, at all times concerned with only what is of use to him. Time is not wasted by sitting listening to a general class lesson on writing, the content of which may be either too simple or too advanced for him. In that each student works at his own pace on his own assignments, the range of ability within the class can be wide. A class group of equal ability is not a prerequisite for the Garrison type of instruction. Instant feedback and the ability to choose assignments of interest keep student motivation high. The Garrison method encourages the student to take responsibility for his own progress. The instructor sets no topics and imposes no deadlines -- the student thus is responsible for drawing on his own resources for topics, for pacing his production during the semester, and eventually for editing his own work. The application of self-responsibility, of course, reaches far beyond the writing class. Last but not least for the writing point of view, the Garrison method eliminates out-of-class marking -- no more need the English teacher take home 75 weekly essays (3 x 25 = 75). This fact alone is sufficient to convince anyone who has taught English composition of the advantages of the Garrison method.

Garrison's method is now being used in composition classes for students of English as a second language at the King Edward and Langara campuses of Vancouver Community College. Adaptations in Garrison's basic approach have been made to reflect the cultural and linguistic differences between these second langauge learners and the native speakers for whom Garrison originally developed his method.

One result of the cultural differences between ESL students and native speakers is an initial resistance to the introduction of the individualized approach of the Garrison method. While it is probably true that all students are wary of unfamiliar teaching methods, the ESL student's reaction is intensified by his school experiences in his home country. Most ESL students are accustomed to traditional educational systems where they are part of a class -- often a very large class -- and where the teacher is always in control. In Hong Kong, for example, where the largest group of ESL students at Vancouver Community College comes from, large classes, rote learning, choral responses and a formal teacher-pupil relationship are common. Describing some of the problems faced by Hong Kong students in Canada, Ivy Chan, a graduate of Hong Kong University and former ESL teacher, explains: "A Chinese student has been brought up to regard learning as almost a sacred affair and teachers as 'masters'." (Chan, 1976, p-11). The Chinese student, she states, does not know how to function in a classroom where "informality reigns". A student with this background might regard as extremely informal, the Garrison method, where the instructor and student sit down together and where the student may freely move around the room, selecting material from the three boxes or consulting with other students.

This resistance to individualized instruction is, however, not an insurmountable obstacle. In fact, the student's traditional respect for the teacher can be turned to advantage because, even though the student may feel he is embarking on a dubious undertaking, he will co-operate rather than challenge the teacher's authority.

At the same time, the instructor can take some positive steps to encourage the student's acceptance of individualized learning. For example, a careful presentation of the concept, procedure, and rationale is essential. Because the student's resistance may be complicated by poor listening skills, the oral explanations must be supplemented by clear handouts. The student should also be encouraged to ask questions. Once the workshop routine has become familiar, the student usually realizes that he is learning from it, and any remaining resistance disappears. He can then enjoy and profit from the personal attention he receives from the instructor.

Another aspect of Garrison's method which meets with the student's resistance is acceptance of the ultimate responsibility for his own learning. Again, this resistance is intensified in the case of ESL students because of cultural factors. The idea that he must learn to be his own editor, recognizing and correcting his own errors, might even be regarded by the student as an abdication of responsibility on the instructor's part. The ESL student often seems to think that the instructor's job is to somehow "pour" knowledge into that empty "vessel" -- the student's head. The instructor, on the other hand, must make clear that he WILL provide help, but that eventually, the student must be able to function on his own. The student sometimes needs to be reminded that the composition class must provide him with a skill that he can use on his own when preparing essays for other courses. It sometimes helps, too, to point out that writing is a skill not unlike swimming or any other form of athletics. If a person wants to learn to swim, he must get into the pool and practice the strokes himself. No amount of "dry land" instruction or physical support from the instructor will give him the skill if he does not practice.

Eventually, the student reaches the realization that he must help himself. Often, however, that realization does not come until mid-way through the course, when he initiates a flurry of essay-writing activity. To avoid the resulting last-minute pressure, the instructor may like to set a series of deadlines for individual assignments. He can also remind the student frequently about how much work he should have completed. The instructor must remain firm about allowing the student to complete only ONE essay at a time and about insisting that the same sequence of writing steps always be followed.

One additional aid, both in overcoming the student's resistance to individualized learning and in promoting his acceptance of responsibility for his own learning, is the scheduling of a weekly session in which the class meets as a group. This gives the students an opportunity to inter-act with one another and seems to promote a cohesive spirit in the class. (The classes at Vancouver Community College usually consist of about twenty students and meet five times per week, and in these circumstances, this session is a feasable adaptation).

While the weekly group sessions are helpful in overcoming culture-related problems, they also have a language-related purpose. The first few such sessions are devoted to the concepts of paragraph unity and coherence and to the skill of outlining. After that, one session per week is spent on a particular method of paragraph development. One week might be spent on how to describe a process, while another might be spent on comparison and/or contrast. The various methods of organization (chronological, spatial, general-to-particular, etc.) are also explained. These ideas come more-or-less naturally to a native speaker because they are dictated by the peculiar logic and thought patterns of English. English thought patterns, however, do not come naturally to the ESL student; they must be learned. As Kaplan points out in this regard, "Logic, which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture. It is not universal." (Kaplan, 1966, p-3) Furthermore, he explains, ". . . each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastering of its logical system." (Kaplan, 1966, p-15) There are a number of rhetoric texts available which present systematically the various methods of development and organization of an English paragraph. Two, which have been used successfully at Vancouver Community College, are From Paragraph to Essay (Longman, 1975) and American English Rhetoric: Writing From Spoken Models For Bilingual Students by Robert Bander (Holt, Rinehart, 1971). Bander's text, in the introductory chapter, borrows from Kaplan to explain how a well organized English paragraph is probably different from a well organized paragraph in another language. In both texts, each chapter concentrates on one type of paragraph development. There are a variety of ways which an instructor might go about teaching the different methods of paragraph development. One way is known as "dictation-prediction." Using this method, the instructor dictates the topic sentence of a paragraph and then asks the student to predict the next sentence. The second sentence is then dictated so the student can compare his prediction to the original. The third sentence is then predicted and subsequently dictated, and so on through the entire paragraph. Another way of handling paragraph development is to have the student read a sample paragraph at home and then analyze and outline it in class. In both cases, the student's attention is focused on the manner in which one idea leads logically to the next.

Once the student becomes familiar with a particular method of development, he uses it in writing his own paragraph. As Garrison advocates, the student begins with "prewriting" steps. First, he makes a list of ideas (content). These ideas must be as specific as possible but need not be in any particular order. When he has completed the list, the student takes it to the instructor, who asks him to identify his thesis or purpose in writing. Expressed as a statement, this becomes the topic sentence. The student now eliminates any details irrelevant to his topic sentence. If, for example, he decides that his purpose is to tell how to MAKE a silk screen print, he will have to cross out any details related to the MARKETING of prints. The instructor also points out any lack of specificity. In writing process paragraphs, for example, the student often forgets to include measurements or quantities. When both instructor and student are satisfied with the content, the student organizes his list into a formal outline. Although Garrison does not demand a formal outline, it has been found that second language students benefit from this intermediate stage. The instructor checks the completed outline for logical order and clear relationships between headings and sub-headings. (The two pre-writing steps can perhaps later be combined into one detailed outline.) His outline approved, the student writes his first draft and presents it for the instructor's editorial comments on sentence structure.

It is important to limit the length of a piece of writing to one page; students with severe language problems may write even less. Although initial passages may consist of only one paragraph, the student does eventually have to deal with subject matter complex enough to require more than one paragraph. If he has learned that an expository paragraph requires a lead, development, and conclusion, it is relatively simple for him to expand these concepts to an introductory paragraph, body, and concluding paragraph. Nor is it difficult for him, if he understands the principle of paragraph unity, to understand that each new idea requires a paragraph division. He does, however, need practice in making smooth transitions between paragraphs. If he hopes to succeed in other academic courses, he must also learn the mechanics of writing a research paper, including the preparation of footnotes and bibliography as well as the graceful introduction of quotations. During the second half of the course, therefore, the student can write longer pieces, although there is no necessity for him to go beyond about 300 words.

The fact that a student has progressed to studying and practising paragraph development does not necessarily mean that he has mastered English sentence structure. There is, moreover, often a considerable range of language ability in one class. While a few students write consistently in English sentence patterns and make few errors, others can barely construct a simple sentence. The second language instructor's task thus involves a dimension not emphasized in the Garrison approach: the teaching of writing and language. Garrison's plan for remedial work is, nevertheless, adaptable for the second language class. The instructor prepares Remedial Worksheets for the most common language difficulties, such as inappropriate choice of tense or omission of articles. These Worksheets differ from the usual textbook exercises in that they use the student's own writing as context. The instructions for a remedial exercise on article insertion and deletion follow:

1. Circle all the nouns in your paragraph.
2. Test each noun with the word "unspecific". If this word does not change the meaning of the noun, write "U" above it. If the meaning of the noun is changed, write "S" (for specific) above it.
3. Underline all singular count nouns. Those with "U" above them should be preceded by an indefinite article. Those with "S" above them should be preceded by a definite article or other determiner.
4. All other nouns with "S" should have articles.
5. All remaining nouns should have no articles.

When a student's first draft reveals a weakness in article usage, he is directed to a copy of this exercise and applies it to his draft. To complete the exercise, the student may sometimes need to refer to a set of rules -- either in the Information Box or in a grammar text. American English Rhetoric, for example, doubles as a grammar handbook. Once a complete set of information sheets on grammar and rhetoric has been compiled, however, a textbook should no longer be necessary.

Language instruction need not rely solely on the remedial exercises and information sheets. If the whole class is weak in structure, one day per week can be set aside for group instruction. Alternatively, a few minutes at the beginning of each workshop session can be devoted to explaining points of grammar. Another procedure consists of interrupting the workshop for a "mini lesson". Writing a process paragraph, for example, often reveals that many students do not use the passive voice correctly. A "mini lesson" on passives could result from this weakness.

The instructor's purpose is to ultimately "wean" the student away from constant supervision until he can edit his own work and find his own errors. There are several ways in which he can lessen the student's dependence. At the beginning of the semester, when checking at sentence level (skill four), the instructor points out (but does not correct) all errors with the appropriate symbol (T = tense; D = diction, etc.) Gradually, the instructor becomes less specific, perhaps by not specifying the type of errors. Later, he may choose not to indicate the exact word which is incorrect, but rather indicate the line, or even the paragraph in which the error occurs. The student is encouraged to note his own particular weaknesses. After the first essay is checked, the student counts and analyzes the number and types of errors he has made, noting his most severe problems. He must then form the habit of painstakingly checking his work for these points. The instructor might pair students so that each acts as editor of the other's work. This promotes increased student responsibility and eliminates some errors before the instructor checks the work. It is advisable to pair two students whose native languages (and probably strengths and weaknesses) are different.

When editing for sentence errors (skill four), the instructor may choose not to mark all types of errors simultaneously. Pointing out many errors at once may overwhelm the student and prove discouraging. The instructor might be wise to mark at first only the gross sentence errors, such as run-on sentences and fragments. Once a student has rectified these, he can then tackle errors at word level, such as spelling, tense, and diction. The student follows the same sequence when editing his partner's work. The student may also put his draft aside overnight before attempting to edit it -- a time lapse often seems to make errors more obvious.

In running the workshop, the instructor may use Garrison's system of numbered cards, or he may use an alternative system in which he assigns each student a permanent number. As in the Garrison method, the instructor goes through the numbers one by one. If the student does not need help, he simply "passes" to the next person. If the sequence of numbers is not completed in one day, the instructor the next day continues where he left off. An advantage of this system is that the students who are fastest and most assertive (perhaps due to cultural traits) do not monopolize the instructor's time by always taking the first numbers. The instructor may also like to keep a set of index cards, on which the student's permanent number, details of any remedial assignments, and pertinent notes on progress are recorded.

Evaluation is another area where Garrison's procedure has been adjusted to meet the unique conditions of an ESL class. Garrison's method of evaluation has proved difficult to implement because it is virtually impossible to separate instructor and student input to a particular passage. After a student has written five or six drafts, incorporating suggestions from both the instructor and a classmate, the final product is not totally an objective representation of his ability -- particularly in sentence structure. Therefore, in order to obtain further material for evaluation, the instructor can set a series of in-class essays correlating to the types of development being studied. (Because it is written within a restricted time period, the in-class essay has the added advantage of providing good training in exam-taking.) In order to qualify for a grade, the student must complete a required number of workshop assignments (usually eight) and write the regular in-class essays.

The Garrison method has several advantages for the teaching of writing to second language students. Its individualized approach allows for a wide range of language ability within the class; it also prepares the student educated in the traditional system to adjust to the more informal North American class. The individual tutorial approach establishes good rapport between the instructor and the student; by the end of the semester, both know each other very well. Individual conferences between instructor and student also have the advantage of forcing even the shyest student to practise oral communication. No longer can the quiet student sit back and give way to his more voluble classmates. In addition, each student has practice in defending and explaining his ideas, practice which the shy student may again lack in the general class.

The Garrison method has been used at Vancouver Community College for three semesters. The writers have no hesitation in recommending it to other teachers of English composition, because, in their experience -- IT WORKS!

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